

SEXUAL OBSESSION AS DOCUMENTARY: *LOADS*

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John W. Rowberry

Curt McDowell's latest film, *Loads*, marks a milestone in the avant garde filmmaker's career. McDowell has been reaching toward a documentary consciousness in this earlier work (even the seemingly fictional *Thundercrack*) and he achieves it in *Loads* while advancing his personal growth as a filmmaker immeasurably.

Loads is a groundbreaker for more than its place in McDowell's filmography; it is perhaps the first documentary in the gay sexual genre.

McDowell has an obsession for heterosexual men. His particular sexual fetish, for the most part, revolves around oral copulation. While the act itself is not unique (as the saying goes, Today's trade is tomorrow's competition), the methodology McDowell used in making *Loads* is at least removed from the historic stereotype of sucking off a telephone repair man during his lunch break in a road-side restroom.

McDowell rented a studio in the heart of San Francisco's heavily-Latino Mission District and began searching for straight men to film in the act of masturbation. He was either specific or vague in his approach, depending on the circumstance. The response was good, as far as the film is concerned, and we see the half-dozen or so men McDowell approached, as well as other men, who learned from their friends what the film-maker was up to, sought him out.

The film, in black and white, follows a fairly tight narrative line. The editing and rhythm of *Loads* raises it far above a series of set pieces.

We are introduced to each man through the particular aspect of their appeal that first attracted McDowell. In one instance it was the shape of a mouth, in another the way a pair of pants rode low on muscular thighs. Another wanted his tattooed body preserved on film. And so on. The men themselves run the gamut. There is, about them all, the look of the heterosexual, a look of sexual insecurity. There is no gay sensibility in their posing or mugging for the camera, no understanding of their own potential sexual appeal in either attitude, stance, or the display of their chief objects of interest. Unaware, each watches the camera and the film-maker. Sometimes there is a smile that seems more suited to a still photograph; a smile forced and held for an uncountable duration.

There is an awkwardness in how the men show off their cock and ass to the camera. There is, in almost every frame, the sense of voyeurism, both visually and viscerally.

McDowell's narration, itself as paced and composed as the framing, is straight-forward and sincere. First his obsession, then his methodology in making the film. Each man warrants an explanation and an appreciation by the film-maker. We hear and see some

images in real time, others retrospectively.

He tells us how, when he first saw the film's singular bodybuilder walking down the street, he imagined he was attached to the man's shoulders, his own cock firmly locked in place and riding the hard, smooth buttocks below him.

McDowell literally crawls his way around each of the men, showing off the landscape of each man's geographical features as much as the camera can accommodate. Shots are angled for maximum body exposure more than for contrived perspective. Men walk over the camera, walk toward it, walk away from it. As the camera travels in semi-circles around certain of the men's faces, they follow it with their eyes, the turning of their head or their torso. While each seems uninitiated to the posture of modeling, each attempts to exploit their momentary nudity with an undefined, if undeniable, sensibility.

The film is called *Loads* and that is how the film concludes, each man has an orgasm for the camera. Some have masturbated themselves, some have been blown by the filmmaker to the point of orgasm. The filming styles McDowell uses for the orgasms vary with each participant. We see one man shoot his load across the pages of a pornographic magazine, splatter-ing his sperm onto the image of a naked woman with her back to the camera. He rubs the sperm into the page with the head of his cock at the crack of the printed image's ass, as if to reassert his heterosexuality to the camera with the knowledge that his cock would penetrate this woman.

In other instances we see men masturbate themselves to orgasm and shoot across their stomachs, over the fingers of their hands, or into the air in thick white arches. One man climaxes while the film-maker is blowing him, and his load lands across the upturned nose and eyes of McDowell.

The filmmaker seldom leaves this film, even after he has set up the opening premise and introduced the characters. He weaves in and out of the frames at will and is in evidence in most of the climax is that *Loads* is about Curt McDowell's fetish for heterosexual men, and not a film about the men themselves. The same shot, of McDowell looking down on the street below his studio window, opens and closes *Loads*. The narration is non-conclusive. In fact, the film is not to be taken as a complete whole, but rather as an outtake from a larger whole; the ramifications of which extend beyond the real time of the narrative. In an earlier film, McDowell used the persona of a hustler in a straightforward narrative line, to introduce a motif that would be realized with *Loads*. In *True Confessions*, where the filmmaker comes out to his parents in the most uncompromising terms, McDowell hinted at the possibility of *Loads* in head-shot scenes that were culled from interviews with friends about their reaction and relationship to the director. In an unfinished film, *Taboo (Skinny Ties)*, McDowell mixes reality and fantasy in a fiction film about a sexual obsession with a non-fiction heterosexual man played, in the film, by the real man himself.

Loads is not pure cinema verite.

Manipulation of the soundtrack (which is not recorded in real time) and the stylized editing format move *Loads* more toward creative documentary. However, the film consciousness at work here is obviously intent on breaking new ground in both documentary approach and narrative line. Of all the gay independent filmmakers working today, McDowell is one of the most innovative and unquestionably the most strikingly original.

This is not to say that *Loads* is a flawless film. Some segments linger beyond their screen impact, some repetition is unnecessary. In parts, the soundtrack is difficult. The latter can be excused, however, given the overall effect of the film-which indicates a rawness that would include phrasing slightly out of range.

But on the whole, *Loads* is a gay cinema experience the likes of which will be difficult to match.
- John W. Rowberry